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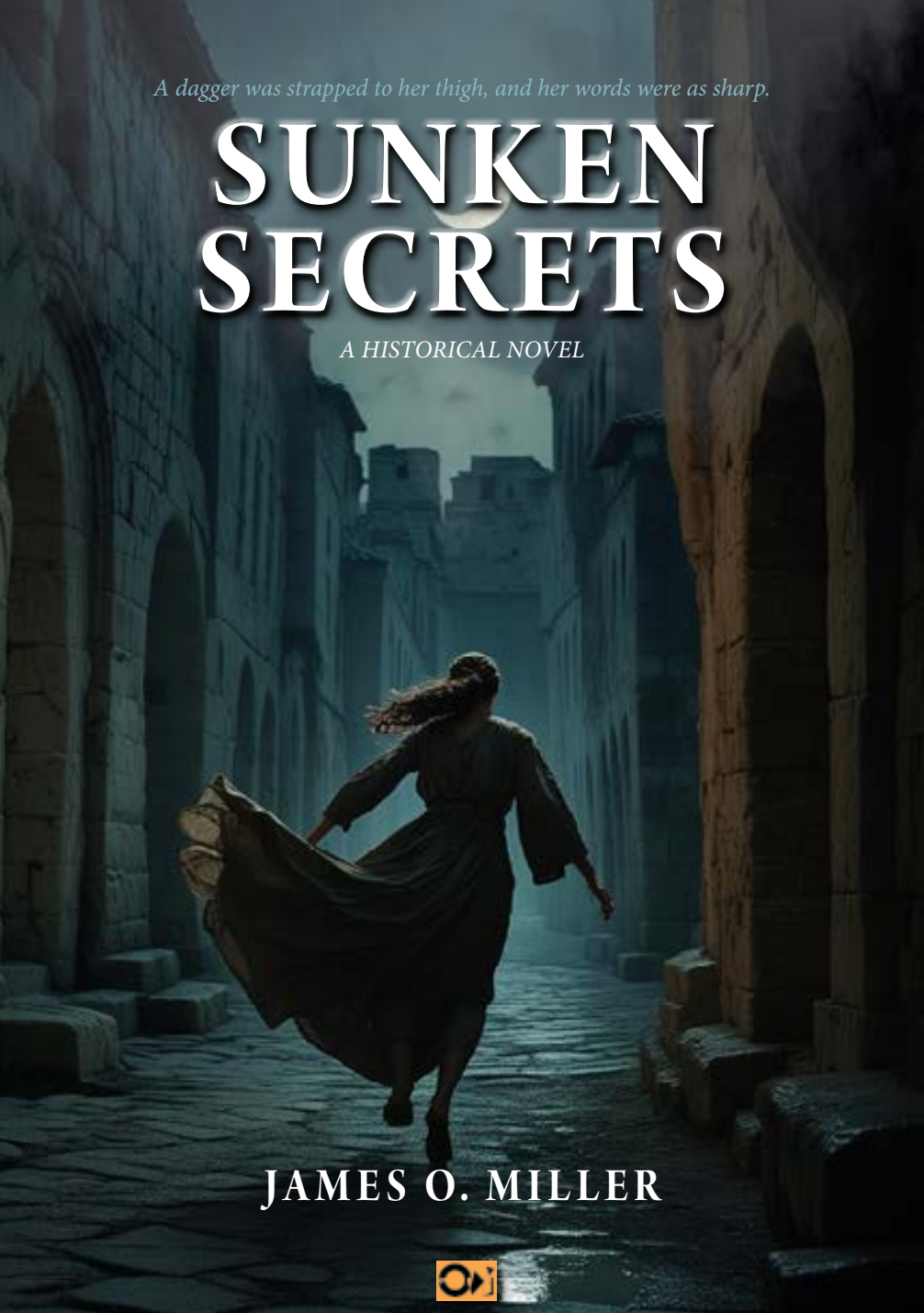
SUNKEN SECRETS

A HISTORICAL NOVEL



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The shadows of Constantinople stretched long and blue over the cobblestones of Galata. The muezzin's cry had faded, but still the air trembled with the echoes of prayers and promises, of dust and dominion. Evening fell like a velvet curtain, soft yet solemn, over a city as ancient as ambition itself.

Below the Tower of Galata, where street merchants had long packed their wares and cats now prowled the corners, a group of five figures gathered beneath an ivy-covered arch. They had come not for prayers nor politics, but for a whisper passed from the withered lips of an old Greek monk who claimed to have seen a map, a map older than the Crusades, older than Constantine, maybe even older than Rome.

"Tell me again what the monk said," whispered Elira, brushing a strand of hair from her face as she leaned in, her olive eyes shimmering with urgency. A dagger was strapped to her thigh, and her words were as sharp.

Thales, the defrocked scholar and their reluctant leader, clutched a satchel stuffed with parchment and ink-stained fingers. "He said, 'The treasure of Theodora lies where the sun kisses the sea, beneath the horns of gold. Guarded not by man, but memory.'"

"And we're sure he wasn't just talking in riddles?" asked Marcos, a heavyset Genoese mercenary with a chipped front tooth and the smile of a man who'd survived too many ambushes.

"He was dying," Elira said. "Men don't lie when their breath stinks of death and vinegar."

The youngest of them, a lanky Armenian lad named Petros, shifted nervously. "I—I still don't understand how treasure could lie *beneath* the Golden Horn. It's all water and ships and silt."

Thales turned to him, voice rising just above a murmur. "And yet, Petros, there is a legend older than any cathedral in this city. That before Byzantium was

even born; an ancient vault was sealed beneath the Bosporus, a burial chamber of gold and guilt. Later, Theodora—the empress who rose from brothel to throne—hid something beneath it. A thing of value not just in coin, but in memory."

"What kind of treasure?" whispered Elira.

Thales paused, then said simply: "Truth."

* * * * *

Their plan unfurled beneath the cover of midnight. The waters of the Golden Horn glistened like black oil under the moonlight. The city slept, mostly. A few lanterns flickered in the distance from fishing boats and the watchtowers of the Varangian Guard, but near the old cistern ruins where they descended, only silence kept watch.

Petros was the first to slip into the water, clumsy but eager. Elira followed with quiet grace. Thales muttered prayers in Koine Greek, the language of philosophers and oracles. Marcos, grumbling, carried the torch and the rope.

They swam beneath what once was the bathhouse of Justinian, now in ruins and forgotten, guided by a map etched into goat parchment that had nearly

disintegrated in Thales' satchel. They reached a submerged archway, cracked with age and calcified like the bones of a drowned colossus.

"Here," Thales breathed. "Just as he said."

A stone disc lay in the center of the archway, covered in Byzantine Greek. Elira read aloud:

"She who ruled from silken sheets to the purple throne buried not coin, but conscience. To pass, you must bleed what you love."

Petros went pale. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Marcos said, pulling a dagger from his boot, "this ain't no ordinary treasure hunt."

"I think…" Thales began, hesitating. "It means sacrifice."

The puzzle was solved not by blood, but by memory. Each of them had to give up something of deep personal meaning. Thales surrendered the signet ring of his father—a traitor executed by the Empire. Elira let her mother's locket drift into the murk. Marcos offered a bone-handled blade from his first campaign. Petros, trembling, dropped a simple wooden flute.

The disc shimmered, groaned, then sank revealing a narrow tunnel carved in ancient limestone.

* * * * *

Inside, they walked through history's marrow.

The air was thick with salt and decay, and the walls were covered in mosaics long faded. One depicted Theodora, not crowned, but kneeling. Around her: hooded figures, a bleeding sun, a black cross inverted.

Petros coughed. "Why would she bury something like this?"

Elira stared at the next mosaic. "Because some truths are too dangerous to live."

At the final chamber, they found the "treasure." No gold. No jewels. Only scrolls.

Hundreds.

Scrolls wrapped in silk and bound with wax. Some bore the imperial seal. Others the mark of lost empires.

Thales unrolled the first scroll, trembling. He read, voice cracking:

"To whomever finds this, know that I, Theodora, was not born into filth, as they said. I was taken, enslaved, and broken—but I *chose* the throne not for power, but to protect the broken from becoming dust. I write here not my sins, but those of emperors. Of murders silenced. Of holy lies. If truth is a blade, let it cut through history."

A stunned silence filled the chamber.

"Gods," Marcos whispered.

Thales stood tall, as if years fell from his shoulders. "This changes everything."

Elira nodded slowly. "We found not gold… but legacy."

* * * * *

But the past guards its secrets with jealous fervour.

As they ascended to the surface, bells clanged in the distance. Soldiers. The Varangian Guard. The monk, it seemed, had not died alone.

"They're coming!" cried Petros.

In the chaos, the scrolls were sealed into oilskin packs. They split, each to a different route through

the catacombs of the city, promising to meet again by the aqueducts.

But only two made it.

Elira and Thales.

Petros was caught. Marcos vanished.

By dawn, the scrolls were hidden beneath a burned bakery in Balat. Thales would spend the rest of his life transcribing them, one by one, into secret codices passed to cloisters, libraries, and wandering scribes. Elira disappeared, though whispers in Baghdad and Cairo spoke of a woman with olive eyes teaching young girls to read.

The scrolls never made it to Rome. Nor to the palace. But in quiet places, in the margins of forgotten books, Theodora's truth began to bleed into the world.

* * * * *

Years later, an old man stood by the edge of the Golden Horn. The sea had not changed. But the city had.

Thales, bearded, frail, looked out across the water,

a faded ring on his finger, the signet long worn blank. He clutched a final scroll, his hands trembling.

He whispered into the breeze:

"Let emperors bury gold. Let queens bury guilt. But truth... truth always surfaces."

And then, as the call to prayer echoed again, he dropped the scroll into the water.

Let it find a new reader.

Let it cut, again.

Fin.

Sunken Secrets

James O. Miller

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A dagger was strapped to her thigh, and her words were as sharp.

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A HISTORICAL NOVEL

James O. Miller. After 23 years of high school teaching history and four years teaching in Germany retirement didn't come well especially since I hate gardening and golf. So I decided to exercise my imagination combined with my academic knowledge.

JAMES O. MILLER